

Intervention

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Abstract

War is a crime. But the crime becomes even more horrible when it is legitimized by political powers that were created to prevent it. The twentieth century witnessed monstrous wars – and the betrayal of workers' struggles and their hope.

Text

War is a crime against humanity. And today, in the atomic age, it is also a crime against nature and against other living beings. But to talk about the wars of the past century, of the twentieth century, is to talk about the nation-state. How painful it is to remember the twentieth century, when the word “nation” was synonymous with “war”! All of us here today are sons or grandsons: First, second or third generation survivors of these wars. Since the onset of modernity, war has preyed upon all of our countries. It was either scoundrels or the feeble minded, who, in a haze of frenzied ideology, told the people that these wars (which were linked to the birth and development of European nations) would become the source of their happiness. This was truly and entirely false! In fact, we know that modernity and every one of our communities were born of the work and imagination of strong women and men who cast off feudalism and the papacy, and who liberated themselves from slavery, struggling for the emancipation of labor. Let's not forget that this “real history” was over-determined and distorted by sovereign violence.

Sovereign violence wished to be legitimated by the state, wished to anchor itself in the identity of the nation, and insist that the people and the nation were a single idea. (So that, perhaps, the subjects could be sent to the slaughter for love of the *patria*?) Today, we shiver when we remember that some of the most important intellectuals of the twentieth century sang paeans to sovereignty – as an absolute good – to war and the destruction of the neighboring nation; it was considered a precondition to the continuing existence of the nation-state. Thomas Mann in 1914: “Under the dictatorship, Germany has found freedom ... Germany is Frederick the Great.” Before the German King stands Voltaire, the pale bourgeois. The two represent the opposition between “reason and the demonic, spirit and genius, dry elucidation and shrouded fate, bourgeois morality and heroic duty.” Or once more: “The war was the spark for my protest against the moral exemplification of the world through the democratic propaganda concerning virtue.” And I will spare you what Henri Bergson

wrote, from the other bank of the Rhine, in November and December 1914; it was the polar opposite of what has been cited previously: “There is a force of honor and a force of brutality.” And it would be superfluous to reveal who enjoyed the privilege of occupying one category and who the other. It seemed like we were back in the Middle Ages when – as Kantorowicz wrote – people proclaimed that “those who declare war upon the French Holy Empire are declaring war upon Lord Jesus.” In this case, too, we can only be astounded at the “banality of evil.”

These intellectuals were interpreting a tradition that is rooted in the nation state. Its spirit is initially anti-Enlightenment and counter-revolutionary. It can be interpreted as the will to maintain national unity in the face of the difficulties occasioned by capitalist accumulation and the explosion of class struggle. It was an ideology that – by exalting historical but universal individualism – concealed the striving for power of the dominant oligarchy. And in this situation, the European nation-state expressed its true vocation. I mean to say here: The practice of imperialist aggression, of colonial conquest, the production of fascist ideology – to the point of the production of monstrous machines of war, to which life in the nation itself became subordinate. Paradoxically, it is precisely this “love of country” or better “emotional *pietas*” that prevents me from exploring more profoundly this topic, and explaining the terrible consequences of it. The violence of imperialist aggression, the barbarism of colonialism are well known. From time to time they resurface and reappear in the background of our present.

To be sure, I am being slightly reductive here about the character of the phenomenon of “the nation.” Please accept my apologies for it. Still: It is certainly the case that – beyond any mystification – this concept is laden with dangerous contractions. It underscores the importance of identity and too often links patriotic generosity to sovereign despotism; too frequently binds the subject to citizenship, on the condition that this is accompanied by alienation and subjection. Where did Ernest Renan’s idea of the nation as a “daily plebiscite” end up?

So fascism and the millions of deaths that the wars of the twentieth century left behind show the consequences of all this. It almost seemed as if the hallucinations of Spengler had won out: “War is the essential fact of life itself ... the beast of prey is the highest form of biological existence ... in Faustian culture the bold blood of the beast of prey rises up against the tyranny of pure thought. In this war, spirit and fate form themselves.”

All this is horrible but, in a way, it only becomes hateful when organizations and parties who claim inspiration from socialism cover up the effects of the nation-state and contribute to its expression, taking their share of responsibility for its carnage and the violence. Yes, socialism: This religion of worker equality and popular freedom that clamorously established itself in the final thirty years of the nineteenth century. It was this socialism that – at the Paris Commune – built a model of

democratic popular organization in resistance to the German invasion and the French bourgeoisie. Less than half a century later, in 1914, and for the rest of the twentieth century, other socialists were pushed – by their reformism and by the illusion of gaining advantages through making compromises with capital (and by their immovable trust and loyalty to the nation) – into collaborating with capitalist elites in a war against fraternal peoples, colonial adventures of conquest and the subjugation of entire peoples. To the point where they took part in the daily war that the nation-state conducted against its own sons, who were considered enemies because they were workers who had become aware of their own exploitation. “Social patriots” who abandoned the class struggle and who allowed themselves to be drawn into a blind positivism and a social Darwinism free of any ethical dimension whatsoever; these people interpreted, again, class and nation through identity, as a metaphysical singularity. But in reality, it was little more than a mishmash of *raison d’État* and dirty corporate interests.

“Under the murderous blows of this imperialist world war, our pride and hope, the International of the working class, has ignominiously collapsed. And the German section of the International – which was destined to march at its forefront – collapsed most ignominiously of all!” wrote Rosa Luxemburg in 1914. And she goes on: “This terrible all-in slaughter of millions of the proletariat, which we are witnessing with horror today; these orgies of murderous imperialism taking place under the hypocritical banners of “country,” “civilization,” “liberty,” and “the rights of people,” are devastating countries and cities, bringing dishonor to civilization, trampling liberty and the rights of people. They represent a true betrayal of socialism.” And – at that moment – Lenin founded a new International, destined to fight against all wars and restore meaning to “peace, work and equality.” The “short twentieth century” began.

And I lived through the “short twentieth century”. And I lived through it with the pain of someone who imbibed joy and hope, only to see it transformed into loss and defeat. I do not wish to speak about the meaning of that century, brief in time but which resonated long beyond its end. Before I talk about it, I would like to advise you that I am switching from a historical perspective to a personal one; from the reflection of the intellect to the reaction of passion. So permit me to discuss three experiences, which are connected to my life.

Twenty years before my birth, in 1914, the First World War broke out. My father, who then was 18 years old, went through it all, through this horrible war, through the mud and the trenches. He left them behind sick. Later, fascist persecution killed him. My father was a socialist. How often he cursed the German socialists in the Reichstag who voted in favor of the war! (There were one hundred deputies there; they could have stopped the declaration of war.) And he cursed the Italian socialists, who mostly did the same thing; he damned their interventionist populism and the

birth of Mussolini's *fascio* [his band] at the time. He cursed them until, in the 1920s, he became a communist: Against war and for the international proletariat. I am here condemning this vile union of socialism and nationalism that killed millions of men in the trenches and in gruesome combat. I am speaking in the name of deserters and rebel soldiers, executed in their thousands, merely for wanting peace.

Let's return to my memories. In the 1950s, I studied in France. The socialists were in power. Guy Mollet was their leader; and he was the head of government too. In Algeria, a revolt against the French colonists broke out. It was a revolt that was related to the movements for independence during the Second World War that swept through Africa and Asia. So my contemporaries were called to take up arms. I have kept in contact with two of my friends from the period. They were torn between the love of country – in the name of which they were called up to fight – and their sense of justice that pushed them to embrace the rebels and to share in their struggle; between loyalty to their fellow combatants and their disdain for the hypocrisy and the cruelty of the commanders of their battalions. One of them fell into a deep depression and the other one, having returned to France, joined the Algerian resistance in the metropolis. Both of them became communists. But they did not join the French Communist Party, which, at the time, unscrupulously made the same infamous, opportunistic choice that it had once condemned the socialists for making. The communists, too, were now serving a nation they claimed was the France of Descartes and Robespierre, while in reality waging a war that was simply an outgrowth of bourgeois egoism and national interest.

If you ask me in whose name I am speaking, I will tell you right away that it is in the name of those brothers, Philippe and Bruno, and of the other Algerians who were tortured because they did not want to torture others – even though they felt responsibility and shame for it – and for the thousands of murdered rebels and massacred innocents.

And here is another memory, which does not belong to the “short twentieth century” and the Cold War. This one is almost from our present; it happened in the final decade of the century, only one hundred years after the birth of political socialism. It was Labour, in the wake of Thatcher, which legitimized policies of the most ferocious liberalism and imposed them in the name of the financial interests of a nation that had dismantled all of its other industries and immiserated its glorious working class. Within one hundred years, the “social patriots” (after waging war on the workers of other countries and massacring the colonized people) had learned how to attack their own base – the workers, their unions, and the poor. Since then, the neoliberal model, whose innocence was guaranteed by the socialists, was imposed upon Europe, and especially upon those who wanted to make Europe their new home. At the end of the twentieth century, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the end of the dualistic history of East and West, globalization was accompanied by a huge push to build a new juridical and legal system on a global scale. But the failure

of the global elites to construct a new order has been resounding. We are still observing its consequences today. They exhibit themselves in the crisis of the market, in falls in global production, and monetary uncertainty, and in difficulties in controlling financial movements. Who could have predicted that these would be the consequences of the emergence of a new order and of the fall of the Berlin Wall that we all welcomed with such joy? It was the beginning of a hell for workers and all subordinates, one in the name of neoliberal austerity. We witnessed and are witnessing the governance of grand coalitions. They act in ways which one could perhaps describe as terroristic (many see them as product of an “extremism of the center,” one which has overwhelmed our political institutions). In the name of austerity, they have created misery, dismantled the Welfare State, and entrusted themselves to the cruel and corrupt laws of the market. Corruption? Yes, because nothing productive will come of imposing misery. Rather, the result will be corruption of the remaining structures of the democratic state. Finally, one must underline that this disaster is being perpetrated in the name of independence, dignity and national economy. Especially when the hegemony of financial capital assails a country and subordinates each and every country to irresponsible global rule, diminishing autonomy and rendering illusory popular representation exercised under the rubric of the national constitution. Here, I am speaking in the name of those who are exploited, of the unemployed and of the hungry.

Today, when movements assert that they are “neither right nor left” and develop resistance against any ethic of rule or austerity, we ought to ask why this is happening. It is immediately clear why these movements cannot be rightwing. Right is reactionary: It denies equality, while simultaneously limiting and insulting freedom. As for the left: The movements have taken into account that the right has always used the corporatist bent of social democracy to its advantage; the latter has been kept on a short leash, neutralized, rendered impotent. Today, using the word “socialism” does not make any sense anymore. Acknowledging yourself to be a leftist or voting left just means involving yourself in innocuous institutional change, from one boss to another. It is a switch in which the social and progressive aspects of democracy have completely vanished and in which opportunism triumphs. We are neither right nor left because we are *other*, these movements say. This is *something other* than our socialist tradition because we cannot even say – unlike many people who came before us, who were among the best of all people – that we are not socialists but rather communists. We cannot say this because the hopes and the force of women and men like Rosa Luxemburg and Antonio Gramsci have been destroyed by “real socialism” in the “short twentieth century.” If we cannot find refuge from the cataclysms of the twentieth century, we can and we must continue to protest, resist, and build a new society. We must fight against war, against any form of colonial slavery, against the empire of finance and against the fetishists of nation and

socialism, who exposed their horrible nature during national socialism. Despite this, if we are not left and not communist either, we have one hope remaining, an *other* within which we can struggle: It is *the class struggle*. However, we rediscover it in a society that has been torn to shreds. If the great historians of antiquity could write that *latifundia ruinere Romam*, then we can rightly say that the nation-state has destroyed Europe and its history of freedom.

Is there a court to which I can appeal? No, there is not. I can only appeal to the citizens and the workers who judge corrupt the democracy of the twentieth century, which has been bequeathed to us. And who want to take action, to return it to peace and justice. I recall here the words of Machiavelli, when he is telling the story of the revolt of *Ciompi*, the wool carders in fourteenth century Florence. They went on strike and bitterly resisted the threats of the *popolo grasso* [the wealthy Florentines] and the arms of the *Signoria* [the name given to the city administration at the time]. An anonymous rebel gets up and tears off his clothes: “Strip all of us naked and you will see that we are alike, dress us in the clothes of the noble patrons and them in ours.” The anonymous agitator continues, turning to the wool manufacturing industry’s wealthy proprietors: “And without a doubt, we shall appear noble and they ignoble.” There is no need for the poor to feel remorse for the violence of their rebellions because “where there is, as with us, fear of hunger and prison, there cannot and should not be fear of hell.” Faithful servants are still just servants and good people are always poor. The moment has arrived, says the anonymous agitator, “not only to free ourselves from them but to become so much their superiors that they will have more to lament and fear from you than you from them.”

We are now ready to repeat this man’s challenge. Court = justice? No: A thousand courts would be needed to bring us closer to a justice that one might describe as a radical transformation of this world and the construction of an *other*.

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